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ABSTRACT

A survey was taken to elicit participants' perceptions of the quality of inservice courses in Pennsylvania. The 610 respondents represented a wide variety of school districts and inservice programs and were made up primarily of teachers, although nurses and administrators responded as well. The responses indicated very strongly that inservice courses are of high quality, are presented by people with excellent abilities to communicate knowledge, and are by and large more valuable than traditional graduate courses at colleges and universities. Results showed a high proportion (60 percent) of permanently certified people continuing to pursue educational development through inservice courses. This result suggests that there will continue to be a large demand for inservice courses so long as they continue to meet the needs of the participants. (DS)

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Participant Perceptions of the Quality of In-Service Programs

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Summary

A survey was taken to elicit participants' perceptions of the quality of in-service courses in Pennsylvania. The respondents represented a wide variety of school districts and in-service programs. Their responses indicate that they feel very strongly that in-service courses are of high quality, presented by people with an outstanding ability to communicate their knowledge and, in most cases, are more valuable than traditional graduate courses at colleges and universities. The fact that more than half of the respondents were already permanently certified teachers suggests that many teachers are interested in personal growth. They are willing to take courses related to their needs and presented at convenient locations even though their only incentive may be personal growth. This was by far the most frequently cited reason for permanently certified teachers to take in-service courses. There would seem to be a large demand for in-service courses, as long as they continue to meet the needs of the participants. This factor is an important one. In-service for the sake of in-service probably would not be acceptable to this group of respondents.

In-Service Education Evaluation Survey

Introduction

Recent changes in regulations governing the application of in-service credit to certification requirements have resulted in large increases in the number of in-service courses offered. The Department of Education is concerned with the quality of these programs on a statewide level. While many of the programs have their own evaluations, a broad observation of the overall situation was deemed necessary. A survey was undertaken to attempt to obtain this information.

Methodology

Sample

The sample consisted of educators who participated in in-service programs during the 1975 calendar year. Although approximately 900 in-service programs were approved that year in Pennsylvania, only about 750 lists of the participants who completed the programs were available at the time this study was initiated. Two persons were randomly selected from each of these lists, and questionnaires (see appendix) were mailed to these 1,500 or so individuals. Of the responses, 610 were usable. These 610, representing 280 school districts and at least 360 in-service programs, constitute the actual sample.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire used in the study is presented in the appendix. It collected demographic and background information on the teacher responding. Additionally, the respondent was asked to rate the quality of his or her most recent in-service course.

Data Analysis

The basic data is presented in a descriptive fashion, using percentages rather than raw frequencies. The background data provided a mechanism for dividing the total group into more homogeneous subgroups. Comparisons of their responses on the quality ratings could then be made.

Results

Background Information

The 610 respondents were predominantly teachers (85 per cent). The next largest group was nurses (3.5 per cent). In terms of level of assignment the largest number of respondents reported themselves to be at the elementary level, although substantial numbers of people from each level did respond.

Almost three out of five respondents are permanently certified. There has been a great deal of study beyond the bachelor's degree by the group. The mean number of credits completed was 27 (24 are required for permanent certification). About one in four had master's degrees. An additional eight per cent had master's equivalency degrees. Only two people reported having doctoral degrees. Respondents also had a broad range of experience. About one out of six respondents had less than three years of experience. An additional 40 per cent were in the three to six year range. The remaining 45 per cent had seven years or more, with more than a fourth of the group having over 10 years. A small proportion, six per cent, had over 20 years of experience.

The policy of the school district toward in-service can make it more or less convenient to take an in-service course. Very few school districts will provide released time for in-service. Six per cent of respondents reported entire released time, eight per cent reported part released time, but 85 per cent took courses entirely on their own time. When respondents were asked who bears the cost of in-service programs, the response was more balanced. Only 46 per cent reported having to pay the entire cost of a course. One respondent in three reported that his or her district paid the entire cost of the course. Almost 60 per cent of the group reported that in-service courses count toward salary increments in their district. More than half of the group had taken more than one course in the previous year; a third had taken more than two.

Course Evaluations--Total Group

Total group responses to the questionnaire appear as percentage figures on the copy of the questionnaire in the appendix. Overall evaluation of the courses was highly positive, with less than two per cent of respondents giving ratings on the negative end of the scale. Approximately 90 per cent of the group felt that competencies to be achieved were clearly identified and that activities in the course were clearly related to those competencies. The remainder gave neutral rather than negative ratings.

Evaluation and follow-up were considered to be important areas. Less than one participant in 10 reported very little evaluation data being collected; less than one-fourth reported substantial amounts of data being collected. Follow-up is a second area strongly related to the evaluative effort. What might best be described as miniscule numbers reported extensive follow-up by any of the three agents thought to be appropriate: intermediate units (as course sponsors), school districts and instructors. Less than five per cent reported extensive follow-up by any of these agents and the largest proportion of respondents reported that there was no follow-up at all, whatever agent was involved.

Additional data was gathered regarding course instructors' ability to communicate their skills and knowledge. About 90 per cent of participants rated them at the "excellent" end of the scale, while less than two per cent rated instructors at the "poor" end of the scale. Course location was rated as convenient by about 82 per cent, inconvenient by six per cent and in between these by the remainder.

The final two ratings requested of participants probably give a more general insight to their ratings of in-service in general. Participants were asked about their future interest in in-service coursework. Only three per cent said they would take no more courses; almost half said they would take many more courses. The remainder of the respondents were closer to the high end of the scale. Finally, participants were asked to compare the course with college or university graduate courses dealing with similar material. Thirteen per cent felt they could not make this comparison. Of those willing to make the comparison, over 61 per cent rated the in-service course more valuable. An additional 34 per cent found the two types of courses to be of about equal value. Only five per cent rated in-service less valuable than other graduate work.

Subgroup Analysis

Provisional vs. Permanently Certified. There are no marked differences between these groups. Approximately the same proportions clustered in the two most positive points of the scale. Provisional teachers, less experienced and presumably younger, were generally more willing to select the extreme point on the scale. Reversals of this trend occurred on only two of the items, ratings of materials and equipment and the comparison of in-service with more traditional college courses.

Different Levels of Assignment and Course Content. Course content was divided into three categories: subject matter content, teaching skills and personality building skills. The third category accounted for about 10 per cent of courses at elementary levels and dropped to five per cent at secondary levels. Different or multiple responses generally accounted for about 20 per cent. The remaining 70-75 per cent of courses at all levels were divided between the two areas of content and teaching skills. There was a noticeable pattern here. As the level of assignment becomes higher, more in-service programs are devoted to content and less to teaching skills. At the early childhood level, four times as many courses are teaching skills courses, while at the senior high level, only four out of seven are teaching skills courses.

Experience. Very little difference among groups based on level of experience was shown in the overall ratings of course quality. Between 85 and 90 per cent of all the groups rated courses in the two categories at the "excellent" end of the scale. Those with seven to 20 years of experience had a higher proportion using the extreme ranking than those with less (up to six) or more (more than 20) years of experience.

Ratings of instructors' ability to communicate were very high, with the least experienced group being the least positive. More experienced groups had higher proportions of people giving highly positive ratings. Only 10 out of 600 gave negative ratings on this particular area.

Enthusiasm for taking future courses fell off only moderately with experience, except for the most experienced group (more than 20 years). They show less desire to take more courses and have the highest proportion not wanting to take any more at all.

Comparisons of in-service courses with traditional college courses also produced strongly positive ratings. Here again, teachers with less than three years' experience gave the lowest ratings. About one-third rated in-service courses more valuable than graduate courses. This contrasted with the fact that over one-half of the total group of more experienced teachers found them to be more valuable.

Experience had no consistent bearing on the content of in-service courses taken. Teachers from all levels of experience take all types of courses, with more skills courses than content courses being taken by all levels.

School District Policies. An examination of whether courses are taken on the participants' own time or on released time produced results suggesting only small differences. People taking courses on the district's time gave slightly higher ratings of overall quality. Those taking courses on their own time rated the instructor's ability to communicate his or her knowledge higher than those on released time. Enthusiasm for taking future courses was about equal. Participants taking courses on released time were more likely to rate them more valuable than graduate courses offered by colleges.

A similar examination, with grouping based on whether the cost of the course is borne by the participant or the school district, showed slightly different results. Those whose courses were paid for by the district were consistently more positive in overall ratings, ratings of instructor's ability to communicate and interest in taking more courses. There were no differences in the comparison of in-service and traditional graduate courses.

Discussion

The sample responding to this survey is large and probably somewhat representative of the state. More than half of the school districts were represented. A figure approaching half of the number of programs for which completed lists were available is also represented. The size and rather broad representation in the sample group suggest that the data is probably fairly stable.

That the largest proportion of respondents would be teachers is an expected result. The grade level assignments also reflect the population. A surprising factor was the high proportion of permanently certified people continuing to pursue their educational development in in-service courses. The figure of 60 per cent overstates the case slightly, because a number of respondents apparently completed their requirements for permanent certification within the 12-month period surveyed. Further investigation revealed that this group made up slightly less than 10 per cent of the total, leaving more than half of the group taking courses beyond minimal certification requirements.

School district support of the course participant in terms of providing released time is minimal. On the other hand, more than half of the participants report that their school districts are willing to pay part or all of the cost of their courses, a fact which should encourage high participation. An additional incentive is that in-service credits may count toward salary increments. Almost 60 per cent of the respondents reported this to be the case in their district. A more subtle incentive, not mentioned in the data formally collected but frequently stressed on added comments, is the relationship of the course to the teacher's actual needs. Numerous respondents mentioned courses being tailored to meet their special needs by their school district or by an institution which had assessed their needs and interests.

Given several such incentives, plus the fact that the sample included no one who did not take in-service courses, positive results probably should be expected. This expectation was fulfilled, but to an extreme degree. For the total group, less than two per cent of the respondents give ratings at the negative end of the scale when asked to rate overall program quality. A similar pattern exists on other items dealing with some specific mechanical aspects of programs. These ratings suggest that people taking in-service courses offered in Pennsylvania are extremely impressed with the quality of those courses. Ratings of instructors, materials and equipment tend to be equally high, supporting the impression of very strong satisfaction with the courses. The overall rating does not correlate with any of the background variables. Such factors as level of assignment, number of credits taken, paying or not paying for the course, taking it on one's own time or on the school district's time, or years of experience have no appreciable relationship with the perceived quality of an in-service course. The overall rating is closely related to the rating of the instructor's ability to communicate and the degree to which competencies to be acquired in the course are identified and related to course activities. The amount of follow-up performed after the course and the convenience of course location were also unrelated to the overall rating.

The fact that background and peripheral factors were not related to the rating suggests that the respondents were, in fact, rating courses on their content and presentation. Taken together with the high ratings, this information is very positive.

While the information on the perceptions of the participants is very encouraging, more hard data is needed to certify the highly positive quality of in-service programs. Two sources would be available, individual course evaluations and follow-up on participants to see if they are actually practicing competencies obtained in the course. The survey results are fairly discouraging in these areas, with only a quarter of the respondents reporting substantial amounts of evaluation data being collected and hardly any reporting follow-up. It is noteworthy that overall ratings were significantly correlated with amount of data collected for evaluation. This relationship indicates that courses with more evaluation received higher ratings in the overall evaluation. No such relationship appeared between follow-up and overall ratings, possibly because these events (the course and the follow-up) are quite separate in time and may, therefore, be dissociated. The fact that almost no follow-up is done limits the variance of this particular variable, minimizing any correlation that may exist. A case for more evaluation can be made from the results on hand. Follow-up is a different issue, but it remains the only way to be sure that competencies that are supposedly developed by in-service programs are actually being demonstrated.

An additional way to investigate respondents' perception of the quality of in-service courses is to ask them if they are willing to take more courses. Only a very small proportion would take no more courses. Over half would take quite a few more. Further investigation showed a declining trend in the desire to take more courses as amount of experience increased. This is certainly something that would be expected. Even in the most experienced group, however, only small numbers feel that they don't want any more courses.

A second way of indirectly approaching the quality rating of in-service was to request a comparison with traditional college or university graduate courses. While many were unwilling to make this comparison, 61 per cent of those who did felt in-service courses were more valuable and an additional 34 per cent found them equal in value to traditional courses. Only a small fraction of the group felt that traditional graduate courses were more valuable. Respondents were asked to defend their position on this particular item. The chief factors favoring in-service courses seemed to be a closer relation to teachers' needs, immediate application, and convenience of time and place.

Appendix

IN-SERVICE EDUCATION SURVEY

Name _____
School District where employed _____
Sponsor of course(s) _____

PROFESSIONAL ASSIGNMENT

Position
Teacher 85.2 Supervisor 1.8 Counselor 1.8 Nurse 3.4 Other 7.6 (Specify) _____

Level
Early Childhood 6.4 Elementary 42.6 Middle 6.9 Jr. High 9.0 Sr. High 13.4
Special Education 9.8 Other 3.6 (Specify) _____
Multiple 8.0

PENNSYLVANIA CERTIFICATION HELD (Check one)

Provisional 40.2 Permanent 58.9

STUDY BEYOND BACHELOR'S DEGREE

Total number of credits Mean 27.09

Degrees			
Master's	Yes 23.8	No 74.3
Master's Equivalency	Yes 8.0	No 90.0
Doctorate	Yes 0.3	No 97.9

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE IN YEARS

Less than 3 15.9 3 to 6 39.5 7 to 10 17.4 11 to 20 21.0 More than 20 6.1

SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICY REGARDING IN-SERVICE COURSES TAKEN FOR CREDIT

Time	District provides entire released time	Yes 6.1	No 93.0
	District provides part released time	Yes 8.0	No 91.0
	Courses are taken entirely on one's own time	Yes 84.9	No 14.1
Payment	District pays entire cost of course	Yes 35.2	No 63.4
	District pays part and participant pays part	Yes 16.6	No 82.1
	Participant pays entire cost	Yes 45.9	No 52.8
Salary	In-service courses count toward salary increment	Yes 57.8	No 40.8

Number of in-service courses completed in the previous 12 months Mean 2.4
Median 2

1. Reasons for enrolling in courses. Please answer in appropriate column, according to your current certification.

   Place a 1 next to the primary reason for your taking the course. Place a 2 next to a secondary reason. Place a 3 if this reason does not apply to you at all.

Provisionally Certified				Permanently Certified			
1	2	3		1	2	3	
86	12	2	Certification	34	16	51	Master's Equivalency
25	69	6	Personal growth	75	23	2	Personal growth
7	29	64	Salary Scale increase	20	48	32	Salary Scale increase
14	10	76	Other (Specify) _____	38	28	34	Other (Specify) _____

2. Your overall evaluation of the in-service course was: (Circle number which is most appropriate).

46.7 40.3 10.3 1.1 0.3
Excellent 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 Poor

3. Were the objectives/competencies to be taught in your in-service course clearly identified?

60.3 28.5 9.5 1.1 0.3

Clearly Identified 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 Not Identified

4. Did the activities of the in-service course relate clearly to the competencies identified?

61.8 29.2 6.9 1.5 0.2

Clearly 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 Not at all

5. To what extent did the evaluation of your in-service program collect evidence (tests, questionnaires, etc.) that the participants had attained the competencies?

23.0 36.2 23.0 8.9 6.7

A Great Extent 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 Very Little

6. Has any attempt been made to follow-up your in-service experience to determine how well the competencies you learned can be applied in your situation? (Circle NA if inappropriate for that group to follow-up.)

								1	2	3	4	5
I.U.	Extensive	1	2	3	4	5	Not at all	39.2NA 4.3	6.2	8.7	2.6	29.2
District	Extensive	1	2	3	4	5	Not at all	36.9NA 3.0	5.4	5.4	3.9	30.3
Instructor(s)	Extensive	1	2	3	4	5	Not at all	37.4NA 4.9	6.1	8.2	3.1	24.9

7. How would you describe the content of your in-service course? (Check one)

23.6 Development of content knowledge
49.2 Development of additional teaching skills
7.4 Development of personality building skills
8.2 Other (Explain) _____
10.5 Multiple _____

8. Rate the instructor's ability to communicate his or her knowledge and skills.

55.6 33.3 9.2 1.1 0.3

Excellent 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 Poor

9. Course location was:

60.5 21.5 12.1 3.3 2.3

Convenient 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 Inconvenient

10. Materials/equipment supplied to you were:

46.1 34.6 12.0 3.0 1.5

Excellent 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 Poor

11. How would you assess your future interest in taking in-service coursework?

46.7 30.7 14.4 4.1 2.8

Take Many More Courses 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 Take No Courses

12. Do you have any general suggestions for improving in-service education as you have experienced it?

13. Rate the in-service course as compared with a college or university graduate course dealing with similar material.

60.9	49.2	More valuable
33.5	27.0	About the same
	4.6	Less valuable
5.7	13.4	Not able to compare

14. List your reasons for the rating in item 13.